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[InterViews]

An Introduction
to Qualitative
Research
Interviewing

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In Chapter 2, the qualitative research *interview* is regarded as a one form of conversation and related to other forms of conversation, such as a philosophical discourse or a therapeutic interview. The chapter concludes with an outline of the mode of understanding of the qualitative research interview and a discussion of the interview in relation to different conversational contexts.

Philosophical traditions congenial to the nature of qualitative research interviewing are presented in Chapter 3. They involve post-modern linguistic constructions of reality, hermeneutical interpretations of the meaning of texts, phenomenological descriptions of consciousness, and dialectical development through contradictions.

The meaning of *research* is discussed in Chapter 4 with regard to conceptions of science, including a positivist conception of science hardly compatible with qualitative interviewing. The meaning of *qualitative* is treated in relation to a common quantitative versus qualitative controversy. The issue of objectivity and subjectivity in qualitative interviews is also addressed and, finally, examples of qualitative research in practice are included: market research, feminist research, and psychoanalysis.

Readers who are unfamiliar with social science methodology and philosophy may, as suggested in the first chapter, go directly to the depiction of the interview situation in Chapter 7 and subsequent chapters on the interview stages and then return to the following conceptual discussions.

2



The Interview as a Conversation

The research interview is a specific form of conversation. In order to clarify the nature of the research interview I will compare it to other forms of conversation. Excerpts from three different conversations are presented here: first, Socrates teaching Agathon the conceptual nature of love; then, a patient learning about her own feelings of hate in a therapeutic session as presented by Rogers; and finally, a research interview on the experience of learning about interior architecture as reported by Giorgi. These different interviews invoke different forms of interaction that produce different kinds of knowledge. The chapter concludes with an outline of the mode of understanding of the qualitative research interview, followed by a discussion of the interview in relation to different conversational contexts.

Knowledge as Conversation

In Chapter 1 a traveler metaphor of interview research was introduced, emphasizing conversation. I will distinguish among the use of conversation as part of everyday interactions, as a professional interchange, and as a philosophical dialogue. These three uses may be seen as specific forms of a common language understanding of conversation as an “oral exchange of sentiments, observations, ideas, opinions” (*Webster’s*, 1967); they involve different forms of interaction and levels of reflection on the form and the content of the conversation.

In the spontaneous *conversations of daily life* attention will tend to be on the conversation topic, whereas the purpose and the structure of the conversation remain unproblematized. If, however, some kind of break occurs, there may be a change from a spontaneous level to a meta-level where the aim and form of the talk is reflected. This may be the case if, for example, one of the participants asks, "Why are you asking me about this?"

Professional interviews take a variety of forms, such as a legal interrogation, a job interview, a therapeutic interview, or a research interview. They each have their different purposes and structures, with less or more systematic questioning techniques, as well as a reflection upon the aim and mode of questioning. In relation to conversations in everyday life, the research interview is characterized by a methodological awareness of question forms, a focus on the dynamics of interaction between interviewer and interviewee, and a critical attention to what is said. In professional interviews there is usually an asymmetry of power: The professional is in charge of the questioning of a more or less voluntary and naive subject. In contrast to the reciprocal interchanges of everyday and philosophical conversations, there tends to be a one-sided questioning of the subject by the professional.

In a *philosophical discourse* the partners are on an equal level and there is a reciprocal questioning of the logic of the participants' questions and answers, as well as of the true nature of the knowledge being debated. The discourse rests on a joint commitment of the participants to seek truth—it is an attempt to get beyond mere opinion to true knowledge. It is guided by a questioning of the conversation's subject matter, with the partners in the dialogue following mutually binding rules for argumentation (see Bernstein, 1983).

The hermeneutical philosopher Gadamer (1975) describes a genuine conversation on the basis of Plato's dialogues:

A conversation is a process of two people understanding each other. Thus it is characteristic of every true conversation that each opens himself to the other person, truly accepts his point of view as worthy of consideration and gets inside the other to such an extent that he understands not a particular individual, but what he says. The thing that has to be grasped is the objective rightness or otherwise of his opinion, so that they can agree with each other on the subject. (p. 347)

The intentions of the conversing partners give way to what Gadamer calls "the law of the subject matter." When one enters into a dialogue with another person and is then carried further by the dialogue, it is no longer the will of the individual person that is determinative. Rather, the law of the subject matter is at issue, and it elicits statement and counterstatement and in the end plays these into each other.

This ideal description of a conversation pertains to a philosophical discourse, and may in some cases also apply to the interactions of daily life. In professional conversations, however, there is usually an asymmetry of power with specific, and sometimes contradictory, underlying purposes.

I now give an example of a philosophical conversation and examples of two professional conversations, a therapeutic interview and a research interview. The philosophical conversation seeks truth through an argumentative discourse; the therapeutic interview aims to instigate changes in the patient's personality and self-understanding through interpretations in an emotional interaction; and the research interview seeks through questioning to obtain knowledge of the subject's world. The nature of the knowledge constituted through the interactions of the three conversations differs: logical conceptual knowledge, emotional personal knowledge, and empirical knowledge of the everyday world.

Socrates' Philosophical Dialogue on Love

Plato's "Symposium" is a philosophical dialogue in a dramatic form. A party has been cast in honor of the poet Agathon, who in the year 416 B.C. had received a prize for one of his plays. The guests, each in their turn, give speeches in honor of Eros, the god of love. Their talks are accompanied by plenty of wine: Aristophanes has to miss his turn because of severe hiccups, but does give his speech; a drunken Alcibiades crashes into the party with a speech of love to Socrates, who—as dawn arrives—is the only one still seated at the table.

The "Symposium" consists of monologues and dialogues, alternating among rhetorical speeches, rigorous argumentation, and humor. Plato's form of communication is indirect: Socrates' assumed ignorance and his ironical style neither confirm nor disconfirm the many

knowledge claims put forth. His uncovering of contradictions in his opponent's arguments offers indications to those who will listen.

In his own speech, Socrates depicts Eros as desire for beauty, good, and truth. He starts by questioning the preceding speaker, Agathon, who has given a rather pompous talk in the rhetorical tradition of the Sophists. The introduction and the conclusion of this passage of the dialogue follow:

"I must say, my dear Agathon, you gave your speech an excellent introduction, by stating that your duty was first to display the character of Love, and then to treat of his acts. Those opening words I thoroughly admire. So come now, complete your beautiful and magnificent description of Love, and tell me this: Are we so to view his character as to take Love to be love of some object, or of none? My question is not whether he is love of a mother or a father—how absurd it would be to ask whether Love is love of mother or father—but as though I were asking about our notion of "father," whether one's father is a father of somebody or not. Surely you would say, if you wished to give the proper answer, that the father is father of son or of daughter, would you not?"

"Yes, of course," said Agathon.

* * * * *

"Now then," said Socrates, "let us agree to what we have so far concluded. First, is not Love directed to certain things; of which, in the second place, he has a want?"

"Yes," he said.

"Then, granting this, recollect what things you named in our discussion as the objects of Love: if you like, I will remind you. What you said, I believe, was to the effect that the gods contrived the world from a love of beautiful things, for of ugly there was no love. Did you not say something of the sort?"

"Yes, I did," said Agathon.

"And quite properly, my friend," said Socrates; "then, such being the case, must not Love be only love of beauty, and not of ugliness?" He assented.

"Well then, we have agreed that he loves what he lacks and has not?"

"Yes," he replied.

"And what Love lacks and has not is beauty?"

"That needs must be," he said.

"Well now, will you say that what lacks beauty, and in no wise possesses it, is beautiful?"

"Surely not."

"So can you still allow Love to be beautiful, if this is the case?"

Whereupon Agathon said, "I greatly fear, Socrates, I know nothing of what I was talking about." (Plato, 1953, pp. 167-173)

In this passage, Socrates takes Agathon's speech on love as his point of departure. He repeats it in a condensed form and interprets what Agathon has said and then asks for his opponent's confirmations or disconfirmations of the interpretations. Socrates starts out by appearing naive and innocent, he praises Agathon's views on Eros, then follows up by uncovering one contradiction after another in Agathon's position. Several of the arguments end with a question leading to a given answer, which Agathon then accepts. In the end Agathon is led to retract his views completely and to agree with Socrates' position.

This dialogue on the nature of love is open to several readings. In one interpretation, the dialogue is a genuine conversation in Gadamer's (1975) sense, here as an open philosophical inquiry seeking true knowledge about the nature of love through a discursive argumentation. It is not the understanding of a particular individual, but of the objective rightness of what he says, so that the two of them can agree on the subject matter. In another reading, Socrates already has a true knowledge of the nature of love, and the purpose of the conversation is educational, through a critical questioning of Agathon to lead him and the other participants in the symposium toward an insight into the nature of love that Socrates already possesses. At the basis of his questioning there is a fundamental belief that Agathon already possesses true knowledge of the nature of love but needs help to uncover this truth, and Socrates takes the role of midwife, delivering the truth. His questioning is not open, nor is it neutral on the content of the dispute, but presupposes a specific theory of knowledge—the belief in man as an immortal and reborn soul, where learning is recognition of what the soul has already known.

The philosophical discourse is a harsh form of interaction—Socrates likens himself to a legal interrogator—that aims at gaining theoretical knowledge through the unrelenting rigor of a discursive argumentation. Research interviews generally have a milder form; the interviewee is an informant, not a philosophical opponent. The interviewer asks questions of the interview subject in order to obtain knowledge about his or her life situation, and rarely enters into

tenacious arguments with the subject about the logic and truth of his or her statements. It is beyond the scope of the research interview for the interviewer to argue the strength of his or her own conception of the topic investigated or to try to change the subject's convictions. In contrast, the therapeutic interview aims at changes—through personal interaction rather than through logical argumentation—and the changes sought are not primarily conceptual, but emotional and personal.

A Therapeutic Interview on Hate

Since Freud's invention of psychoanalysis at the turn of the century, a large body of experience has been gathered about the use of therapeutic interviews. The presentation below of a passage from a therapeutic interview has a twofold purpose: to indicate the possibilities for research interviewers to learn from the techniques developed within the therapeutic profession, and to demonstrate some of the differences between therapeutic and research interviews.

Rogers was a pioneer in developing an open, client-centered interview form, originally termed *non-directive* and later changed to *client-centered*, with the insight that all interviewing implies a sense of direction. Rogers also pioneered the use of tape recorders and the transcription of entire therapy sessions, making the therapeutic interaction and questioning techniques available for public scrutiny. Rogers's writings on therapeutic interviews have been a source of inspiration for the development of qualitative interviews for research purposes.

The following sequence is taken from *Client-Centered Therapy* (Rogers, 1965). It was conducted by a counselor applying Rogers's approach, and in this case it is reproduced from notes the therapist took during the interview.

S (Subject): (*Silent for two minutes. Then begins to talk in a hard flat voice, quite unlike her usual tone. Does not look at counselor. There was much repetition, but the following excerpts give the major thoughts.*) You feel I want to come, but I *don't*! I'm not

coming any more. It doesn't do any good. I don't like you. I hate you! I wish you never were born.

C (Counselor): You just hate me very bitterly.

S: I think I'll throw you in the lake. I'll cut you up! You think people like you, but they don't. . . . You think you can attract women, but you *can't*. . . . I wish you were *dead*.

C: You *detest* me and you'd really like to get rid of me.

S: You think my father did bad things with me, but he didn't! You think he wasn't a good man, but he *was*. You think I want intercourse, but I *don't*.

C: You feel I *absolutely misrepresent* all your thoughts.

S: . . . You think you can get people to come in and tell you everything, and they'll think they're being helped, but they're *not*! You just like to make 'em suffer. You think you can hypnotize them, but you can't! You think you're good, but you ain't. I hate you, I hate you, I *hate* you!

C: You feel I really like to make 'em suffer, but that I *don't* help them.

S: You think I haven't been straight, but I have. I *hate* you. All I've had is pain, pain, pain. You think I can't direct my own life, but I can. You think I can't get well, but I can. You think I had hallucinations, but I didn't. I hate you. (*Long pause. Leans on desk in strained, exhausted pose.*) You think I'm crazy, but I'm not.

C: You're sure I think you're crazy.

S: (*Pause.*) I'm tied, and I just can't get loose! (*Despairing tone of voice, and tears. Pause.*) I had a hallucination and I've got to get it out!

* * * * *

S: I knew at the office I had to get rid of this somewhere. I felt I could come down and tell you. I knew you'd understand. I couldn't say I hated myself. That's true but I couldn't say it. So I just thought of all the ugly things I could say to you instead.

C: The things you felt about yourself you couldn't say, but you could say them about me.

S: I know we're getting to rock bottom . . . (pp. 211-213)

The emotional tone of this counseling session was described as follows:

Just as it is impossible to convey on paper the venom and hatred in the client's voice, so it is utterly impossible to convey the depth of empathy in the counselor's responses. The counselor states, "I tried to enter into and to express in my voice the full degree of the soul-consuming anger which she was pouring out. The written words look incredibly pale, but in the situation they were full of the same feeling she was so coldly and deeply expressing." (p. 212)

In this therapeutic session the subject takes the lead right from the start, introduces the focal topic—the detestable counselor—and tells how much she hates him. He responds by reflecting and rephrasing her statements, emphasizing their emotional aspects. He does not, as would be likely in a normal conversation, take issue with the many accusations against him. In this specific sequence the counselor neither asks questions for clarification, nor does he offer interpretations. At the end, after "she has gotten it all out," the subject acknowledges the counselor's ability to understand her, and she herself offers an interpretation: I couldn't say I hated myself, so I just thought of all the ugly things I could say to you instead.

The purpose of the counseling interview was to help the patient with her emotional problems, and the counselor consistently reflected the emotional aspects of the patient's statements about his relationship to her, which in this case led to the subject interpreting her own behavior. In psychoanalytical terminology, the topic of this session was *transference*, the patient's intense emotional relationship with the therapist. It is difficult to draw any strong line of demarcation between a therapeutic and a research interview. Both may lead to increased understanding and change, but with the emphasis on personal change in a therapeutic interview and on intellectual understanding in a research interview. Although the main purpose of therapeutic interviews is to assist patients to overcome their suffering, a side effect is general knowledge about the human situation. This will be discussed later in relation to psychoanalysis as a research method (see Chapter 4, Psychoanalytical Knowledge Production).

A Research Interview on Learning

The purpose of the qualitative research interview discussed here is to understand themes of the lived daily world from the subjects' own perspectives. The structure of the research interview comes close to an everyday conversation, but as a professional interview it involves a specific approach and technique of questioning. Technically, the qualitative research interview is semistructured: It is neither an open conversation nor a highly structured questionnaire. It is conducted according to an interview guide that focuses on certain themes and that may include suggested questions. The interview is usually transcribed, and the written text together with the tape recording are the material for the subsequent interpretation of meaning.

The following interview passage is taken from the article "An Application of Phenomenological Method in Psychology" by Giorgi (1975). The research question guiding the interview was: What constitutes learning in the everyday world? The first half of the interview, conducted by a student, is reproduced here.

R (Researcher): Could you describe in as much detail as possible a situation in which learning occurred for you?

S (Subject: E. W., 24 year-old female, housewife and educational researcher): The first thing that comes to mind is what I learned about interior decorating from Myrtis. She was telling me about the way you see things. Her view of looking at different rooms has been altered. She told me that when you come into a room you don't usually notice how many vertical and horizontal lines there are, at least consciously, you don't notice. And yet, if you were to take someone who knows what's going on in the field of interior decorating, they would intuitively feel if there were the right number of vertical and horizontal lines. So, I went home, and I started looking at the lines in our living room, and I counted the number of horizontal and vertical lines, many of which I had never realized were lines before. A beam . . . I had never really thought of that as vertical before, just as a protrusion from the wall. (Laughs) I found out what was wrong with our living room design: many, too many, horizontal lines and not

enough vertical. So I started trying to move things around and change the way it looked. I did this by moving several pieces of furniture and taking out several knick-knacks, de-emphasizing certain lines, and . . . it really looked differently to me. It's interesting because my husband came home several hours later and I said, "Look at the living room; it's all different." Not knowing this, that I had picked up, he didn't look at it in the same way I did. He saw things were different, he saw things were moved, but he wasn't able to verbalize that there was a de-emphasis on the horizontal lines and more of an emphasis on the vertical. So I felt I had learned something.

R: What part of that experience would you consider learning?

S: The knowledge part that a room is made up of horizontal and vertical lines. The application of that to another room; applying it to something that had been bothering me for quite a long time and I could never put my finger on it. I think the actual learning was what was horizontal and vertical about a room. The learning that was left with me was a way of looking at rooms.

R: Are you saying then that the learning was what you learned from Myrtis, what you learned when you tried to apply . . . ?

S: Since I did apply it, I feel that I learned when I did apply it. I would have *thought* that I learned it only by having that knowledge, *but* having gone through the act of application, I really don't feel I would have learned it. I could honestly say, I had learned it at that time. (pp. 84-86)

This interview investigated what constitutes learning for a woman in her everyday world. It began with an open request to describe a situation where learning occurred. The woman chose the learning situation she would talk about—interior decorating; she described this freely and extensively in her own words. The answer spontaneously took the form of a story, a narrative of one learning episode. The interviewer's first question introduced learning as the theme of the interview; her remaining questions depart from the subject's answers in order to keep learning in focus and to ask for clarification of the different aspects of the subject's learning story.

This interview gives a good picture of a semistructured research interview focusing on the subject's experience of a theme. The purpose

was to investigate the subject's experience of learning, and the interviewer's questions aimed at a cognitive clarification of the subject's story of learning. The mode of interviewing was inspired by a phenomenological philosophy, which is based on a descriptive study of consciousness to be discussed in the next chapter (Chapter 3, Phenomenological Description); the analysis of this interview will be treated later (Chapter 11, Meaning Condensation).

The Mode of Understanding in the Qualitative Research Interview

I now outline the mode of understanding in the qualitative research interview, of which the above interview on learning is one example.

In Box 2.1, 12 aspects of the mode of understanding in the qualitative research interview are depicted in a condensed form. They may be found more or less explicitly formulated in descriptions of research interviews. As brought together here, they represent an attempt to describe the main structures of the qualitative research interview. They will now be discussed in greater detail, with examples from the interview on learning reported by Giorgi and from my own interviews on grading in high schools (see Chapter 1, Conversation as Research; Chapter 5, Interviews About Grades; & Chapter 7, An Interview About Grades).

1. *Life World*. The topic of the qualitative research interview is the lived world of the subjects and their relation to it. The purpose is to describe and understand the central themes the subjects experience and live toward. In the interview reported by Giorgi, the topic of learning was introduced by the interviewer, whereas the subject herself chose the specific instance of learning from her everyday world to talk about. In my own investigation, grades were a central theme in the life world of the high school pupils, and the interviews sought to describe and reflect the meanings that grades had for the pupils.

The qualitative research interview is theme oriented. Two persons talk together about a theme that is of interest to both. The resulting interview can then be analyzed primarily with respect to the life world that is described by the person, or the subject describing his or her life

world. The interviews about grades were analyzed with regard to the common social situation constituted by the grades, such as submissiveness to teachers, competition with peers, and instrumentalization of learning. The interviews could also have been analyzed with respect to the personality structures of the individual pupils in relation to grading. In this study, however, it was the common structures of the school situation constituted by the grades that were of interest and not individual differences among the pupils.

Box 2.1

Aspects of Qualitative Research Interviews

The purpose of the qualitative research interview treated here is to obtain descriptions of the lived world of the interviewees with respect to interpretations of the meaning of the described phenomena.

Life World. The topic of qualitative interviews is the everyday lived world of the interviewee and his or her relation to it.

Meaning. The interview seeks to interpret the meaning of central themes in the life world of the subject. The interviewer registers and interprets the meaning of what is said as well as how it is said.

Qualitative. The interview seeks qualitative knowledge expressed in normal language, it does not aim at quantification.

Descriptive. The interview attempts to obtain open nuanced descriptions of different aspects of the subjects' life worlds.

Specificity. Descriptions of specific situations and action sequences are elicited, not general opinions.

2. *Meaning.* The qualitative research interview seeks to describe and understand the meanings of central themes in the life world of the subjects. The main task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say. Recall the several questions in the interview reported by Giorgi (1975), which sought to clarify the precise meanings of the subject's descriptions.

The interviewer registers and interprets what is said as well as how it is said; he or she must be observant of—and able to interpret—

Box 2.1 Continued

Deliberate Naïveté. The interviewer exhibits an openness to new and unexpected phenomena, rather than having ready-made categories and schemes of interpretation.

Focused. The interview is focused on particular themes; it is neither strictly structured with standardized questions, nor entirely "non-directive."

Ambiguity. Interviewee statements can sometimes be ambiguous, reflecting contradictions in the world the subject lives in.

Change. The process of being interviewed may produce new insights and awareness, and the subject may in the course of the interview come to change his or her descriptions and meanings about a theme.

Sensitivity. Different interviewers can produce different statements on the same themes, depending on their sensitivity to and knowledge of the interview topic.

Interpersonal Situation. The knowledge obtained is produced through the interpersonal interaction in the interview.

Positive Experience. A well carried out research interview can be a rare and enriching experience for the interviewee, who may obtain new insights into his or her life situation.

vocalization, facial expressions, and other bodily gestures. An everyday conversation often takes place on a factual level. A pupil may state: "I am not as stupid as my grades at the examinations showed, but I have bad study habits." Common reactions could then be on a factual level: "What grades did you get?" or "What are your study habits?"—questions that also may yield important information. A meaning-oriented reply would, in contrast, be something like, "You feel that the grades are not an adequate measure of your competence?" Recall the consistent rephrasings of the emotional messages in the client's statements by the counselor in the interview reported by Rogers (1965).

A qualitative research interview seeks to cover both a factual and a meaning level, though it is usually more difficult to interview on a meaning level. It is necessary to listen to the explicit descriptions and meanings as well as to what is "said between the lines." The interviewer may seek to formulate the "implicit message," "send it back" to the subject, and obtain an immediate confirmation or disconfirmation of the interviewer's interpretation of what the interviewee is saying.

3. *Qualitative.* The qualitative research interview aims at obtaining nuanced descriptions from the different qualitative aspects of the interviewee's life world; it works with words and not with numbers. Precision in description and stringency in meaning interpretation correspond in qualitative interviews to exactness in quantitative measurements.

4. *Descriptive.* The qualitative research interview aims at obtaining uninterpreted descriptions. The subjects describe as precisely as possible what they experience and feel, and how they act. Recall the interview reported by Giorgi (1975) in which the introductory question asked the subject for a detailed description of a situation in which learning occurred. The focus is on nuanced descriptions that depict the qualitative diversity, the many differences and varieties of a phenomenon, rather than on ending up with fixed categorizations.

The question of why the subjects experience and act as they do is primarily a task for the researcher to evaluate. An analogy to a doctor's diagnosis may be clarifying. The doctor does not start by asking the

patient why he is sick, but rather asks the patient what is wrong, what he is feeling, and what the symptoms are. On the basis of the information obtained, the doctor may then formulate a hypothesis of which illness may be likely. Further questioning proceeds from this hypothesis, and on the basis of the patient's answers and results from other methods of investigation, the doctor then makes the diagnosis. For both the doctor and the researcher there are cases where it is important to know the subject's own explanations of his or her condition and to ask questions about why. The primary task for both the doctor and the researcher, however, remains that of obtaining descriptions so they will have relevant and precise material from which to draw their interpretations.

5. *Specificity.* The qualitative research interview seeks to describe specific situations and action sequences from the subject's world. It is not general opinions that are asked for. Knowing the opinions, for example, of a pupil about the grading system, is subordinated in a research interview to obtaining concrete descriptions from the pupils—how they experience the grading, how they and the other pupils react to it. On the basis of extensive and rich descriptions of specific grading situations, the interviewer will be able to arrive at meanings on another level, instead of posing such questions as "What is your opinion of grading?" Still, it should be recognized that this type of general opinion question may be relevant, yielding information that is of interest in itself and that may also be compared with the understanding of grades expressed in the spontaneous descriptions of grading situations.

6. *Deliberate Naïveté.* The qualitative interview attempts to gather descriptions of the relevant themes of the interviewee's life world that are as rich and presuppositionless as possible. Rather than the interviewer having preformulated questions and ready-made categories for analysis, the deliberate naïveté and absence of presuppositions advocated here implies an openness to new and unexpected phenomena. The interviewer should be curious, sensitive to what is said—as well as to what is not said—and critical of his or her own presuppositions and hypotheses during the interview. Presuppositionlessness thus also implies a critical consciousness of the interviewer's own presuppositions.

7. *Focus.* The qualitative research interview is focused on certain themes in the interviewee's life world. It is neither strictly structured with standardized questions, nor entirely "nondirective," but is focused on certain themes. The task of the interviewers in the grading study was to keep the grades at the focus of the interview, but within different perspectives or contexts—such as social milieu in school, examinations, and the pupils' plans for the future. It is then up to the subjects to bring forth the dimensions they find important within the focus area. The interviewer leads the subject toward certain themes, but not to certain opinions about these themes.

8. *Ambiguity.* A subject's statements are sometimes ambiguous. An expression can imply several possibilities of interpretation, and the subject may also give apparently contradictory statements during an interview. It becomes the task of the interviewer to clarify, as far as possible, whether the ambiguities and contradictory statements are due to a failure of communication in the interview situation, or whether they reflect real inconsistencies, ambivalences, and contradictions in the interviewee. The aim of the qualitative research interview is not to end up with unequivocal and quantifiable meanings on the themes in focus. What matters is rather to describe precisely the possibly ambiguous and contradictory meanings expressed by the interviewee. The contradictions of interviewees may not merely be due to faulty communication in the interview situation, nor to their personality structures, but may in fact be adequate reflections of objective contradictions in the world in which they live.

9. *Change.* It may happen in the course of an interview that subjects change their descriptions of, and meanings about, a theme. The subjects may themselves have discovered new aspects of the themes they are describing, and suddenly see relations that they had not been conscious of earlier. Thus, in the therapeutic interview reported by Rogers (1965), the patient started, through her talking and the counselor's rephrasings of her statements, to obtain insight about her critique of the counselor as actually being directed at herself. On less dramatic levels the questioning in research interviews may instigate processes of reflection where the meanings of themes described by the subjects are no longer the same after the interview.

10. *Sensitivity.* Interviews obtained by different interviewers, using the same interview guide, may be different due to varying levels of sensitivity toward, and knowledge about, the topic of the interview. Thus an interviewer who has no ear for music may have difficulties obtaining nuanced descriptions of musical experiences from his or her interviewees, in particular with probing more intensively into the meaning of the music. If a common scientific requirement of obtaining intersubjectively reproducible data were to be followed here, the interview form might have to be standardized in a way that would restrict the understanding of musical experiences to more superficial aspects understandable to the average person. A qualitative research interview would instead seek to employ the varying abilities of the interviewers to obtain different nuances and depths of the themes of the interview.

The requirement of sensitivity to, and a foreknowledge about, the topic of the interview contrasts with the presuppositionless attitude advocated above. The tension between these two aspects may be expressed in the requirement for a deliberate conscious naïveté on the part of the interviewer, which is demonstrated in Socrates' interview of Agathon.

11. *Interpersonal Situation.* The research interview is an interview, an interaction between two people. The interviewer and the subject act in relation to each other and reciprocally influence each other. A strong case of emotional interaction took place in the counseling session reported by Rogers (1965). Sullivan (1954) analyzed the psychiatric interview as an interpersonal situation where the relevant data are constituted by the interaction itself, in the specific situation created between interviewer and interviewee. He emphasized the subjective moment in obtaining knowledge in an interview situation—in participant observation it is the interviewer as a person who is the method, the instrument.

The interview situation may, for both parties, be characterized by positive feelings of a common intellectual curiosity and a reciprocal respect. The interview may also be anxiety provoking and evoke defense mechanisms in the interviewee as well as in the interviewer. The interviewer should be conscious of the interpersonal dynamics within the interaction and take them into account in the interview situation and in the later analysis of the finished interview. The

reciprocal influence of interviewer and interviewee on a cognitive and an emotional level is, however, not necessarily a source of error, but can be a strong point of qualitative research interviewing. Rather than seeking to reduce the importance of this interaction, what matters in the research interview is to recognize and apply the knowledge gained from the interpersonal interaction.

12. *Positive Experience.* A qualitative research interview can be a favorable experience for the interviewee. An interview is a conversation in which two people talk about a theme of mutual interest. A well-conducted qualitative interview can be a rare and enriching experience for the interviewee. It is probably not a very common experience in everyday life that another person—for an hour or more—is interested only in, sensitive toward, and seeks to understand as well as possible another's experiences and views on a subject. In practice, it is often difficult to terminate a qualitative interview: Subjects may wish to continue the dialogue and explore further the themes and the insights of the interview interaction.

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The 12 aspects outlined above illustrate the mode of understanding in the qualitative research interview treated in this book. In Chapter 3, philosophical positions congenial with this understanding of the research interview will be presented, and in Chapter 4 this mode of understanding is contrasted with established conceptions of social science research.

Interviews in Three Conversations

This chapter on the interview as a conversation concludes by showing the interviewer-traveler in three conversational contexts. First, the research interview is treated as a specific professional form of *conversational technique* in which knowledge is constructed through the interaction of interviewer and interviewee as outlined in the above description of the mode of understanding in the qualitative research interview. In contrast to the reciprocal interchanges of everyday life, as well as of philosophical conversations, it is the interviewer who, as a professional, asks and the interviewee who answers.

Second, the conversation may be conceived of as a *basic mode of knowing*. Rorty (1979), a neopragmatist philosopher close to postmodern thought, has emphasized the constitution of knowledge through the conversation. When we understand knowledge as the social justification of belief rather than as accuracy of representation, conversation replaces confrontation with nature. The notion of mind as re-presenting an objective world can be discarded, "If we see knowledge as a matter of conversation and social practice, rather than as an attempt to mirror nature" (Rorty, 1979, p. 171). The certainty of our knowledge is a matter of conversation between persons, rather than a matter of interaction with a nonhuman reality. If we regard knowing not as having an essence but as a right to believe, we may see "*conversation* as the ultimate context within which knowledge is understood" (p. 389).

Third, *human reality* may be understood as persons in conversation. To the hermeneutic philosopher Gadamer, we are conversational beings for whom language is a reality (see Bernstein, 1983). In a postmodern conversational version of social constructivism, Shotter (1993) attempts to describe the conversational worlds within which we have our being: "For conversation is not just *one* of our many activities in *the* world. On the contrary, we constitute both ourselves and our worlds in our conversational activity. For us they are foundational. They constitute the usually ignored background within which our lives are rooted" (p. vi).

The conversation in the present approach is not only a specific empirical method: It also involves a basic mode of constituting knowledge; and the human world is a conversational reality. These three understandings of conversation—methodological, epistemological, and ontological—will be applied throughout this book, but with a methodological emphasis on the interview as a specific form of conversational technique.

In Chapter 3, philosophical positions compatible with a conversational approach to interview research are outlined. The emphasis on conversation as a mode of knowing is particularly strong within postmodern and hermeneutical philosophy, and the social, power, and material aspects of the conversational interaction are prominent in postmodern and dialectical understandings of conversations.